A Politician Who Puts Personal Ties First

Bush's Good Manners Prevail

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By David Hoffman
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Vice President Bush walked into the Oval Office for a morning meeting with President Reagan last May 11, he had finally won the Republican presidential nomination, and the formal endorsement he coveted from Reagan was at hand.

Bush's staff and the White House had spent weeks preparing for the endorsement. To take advantage of the evening news,

GEORGE BUSH: MAN AND POLITICIAN
Last in a series

Reagan was to deliver his blessing once in the morning before television cameras and Republican congressional leaders in the Cabinet Room. Then he was to endorse Bush again at the party's black-tie fund-raiser late that evening.

This was to be the sweet climax of the spring primaries for Bush, and a signal to the world that Reagan, one of the great campaigners of the age, was staunchly in Bush's corner for November. The Bush staff had written a two-page statement for the president and raised expectations in the media for the big moment.

But Reagan was distracted by the upcoming Moscow summit and the flap over whether he and Nancy Reagan had used astrology in making White House decisions. According to well-informed sources, the president asked Bush a little plaintively, "George, do we have to do this twice?"

Bush said no, that wasn't necessary. So the first endorsement, the one in good time for the evening news, was scrapped.

Then the president showed Bush a few lines he had written on a yellow legal pad for the nighttime endorsement. It was one paragraph long; after declaring that Bush was "my candidate," he listed Bush's resume, and promised to campaign "as hard as I can." That was it.

Bush said it was just fine.

But it was far from the endorsement he had hoped for, or his staff had planned. Reagan's choice of words was weak, and the impact of delivering the endorsement only at the evening fund-raiser, surrounded by Republican fat-cats in tuxedos, squandered the potential impact on national television. The carefully laid plans of the Bush camp were in ruins, as the White House had to acknowledge by issuing a new, more enthusiastic endorsement the next day.

But Bush had remained true to his most fundamental traits: a finely honed sense of deference to authority, a lifetime aversion to braggadocio and an abiding desire to maintain smooth relations with the important people in his life, even if this sometimes worked to his political disadvantage.

When he launched his campaign last year, Bush did so on the premise that the character of a candidate is central to voter concerns. He said in his announcement speech:

"If I have learned anything in a lifetime of politics and government, it is the truth of the famous phrase, 'History is biography,' that decisions are made by people, and they make them based on what they know of the world and how they understand it. This is true of everyone, including presidents."

Previous articles in this series have explored Bush's life before he became vice president. This article looks at his performance as vice president for clues about how he might act in the Oval Office. It is based on his own comments as well as interviews with peers and subordinates, close friends and campaign advisers.

Many of these people noted how Bush has built his career by forging a succession of personal alliances. They described a man who strives to please others, whether distant voters or his own immediate aides, whether Reagan or other world leaders. These traits have helped earned Bush a loyal following and a battalion of friends, but they have also at times paralyzed his decision-making, according to his associates; he often is reluctant to turn people down, to break out of the given lines of authority, to face conflict among competing advisers.

Unfailingly kind and graceful, associates said, Bush worries about hurt feelings, especially among those closest to him, and tries to smooth them over. Sometimes, according to associates, Bush will avoid dealing with sensitive problems personally and asks others to resolve them on his behalf.

One example cited by several close to him involved Bush's reaction to the 1984 reelection campaign—a landslide triumph for Reagan, but a personal setback for Bush, even in victory. Bush's faltering performance against his Democratic rival, Rep. Geraldine A. Ferraro (D-N.Y.), and a series of awkward public statements and gestures that provoked ridicule in the media, left him in the dumps, unable to pick himself up and restart his own quest for the presidency. He told associates he was considering retiring from public life when his second term ended in 1989 rather than run for president in 1988.

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Bush realized at the time that he needed more discipline in his day-to-day affairs, one participant said. He had been reviewing all social invitations, and letters from congressmen, and felt he was getting swamped in detail, but also was reluctant to let go of it. "Can we do it a little more like how Reagan does it?" Bush asked, the participant recalled.

But Bush did not seize the initiative. Instead, it was a pair of longtime friends, James A. Baker III, now Bush's campaign chairman, and Nicholas F. Brady, nominated last week to be Treasury secretary, who started the rebuilding process for him.

By one account from a well-placed source, Brady, Baker and Bush met quite soon after the 1984 election and discussed what steps were needed to prepare for a Bush run for the White House. The first order of business was to replace the vice president's senior staff with people more politically atuned to the needs of a presidential candidate. Baker and Brady took responsibility for recruiting them.

Baker recruited political operative Lee Atwater, deputy director of the 1984 Reagan-Bush campaign, to set up a new Bush political action committee; Brady recruited a new chief of staff, Craig L. Fuller, who had worked with Baker as Cabinet secretary in Reagan's first-term White House. Fuller insisted that another longtime and increasingly powerful Bush aide, Jennifer Fitzgerald, be moved to Bush's Senate office. Daniel J. Murphy, the chief of staff, said he had wanted to leave, but it was Brady who first told him about his replacement, three weeks before his departure.

Bush approved all these moves but did not initiate them. Murphy said Bush did telephone public relations executive Robert Keith Gray "and said, 'Dan is leaving and I'd appreciate it if you could talk to him.' I was offered vice president of the firm," Murphy said, "an offer I couldn't refuse." The salary was $200,000 a year.

(Gray remembered the episode somewhat differently: "I was over talking with Bush about something else and he said Dan Murphy is leaving and I said that I'd like to talk to him . . . . ")

Many who have worked closely with Bush predicted that if elected president, he will engage the people around him—from other world leaders to his own aides—much more intensely than Reagan ever has. But the same people said that to be an effective president, Bush would need advisers who kept him focused on major goals and minimized distractions from the many people who might have access to him.

"If a governor called and said the Forest Service is not putting out fires, Bush would be on the phone right away to the Forest Service," said an adviser who was worked closely with Bush. Another recalled how Bush was whipsawed by conflicting advice in New Hampshire on the first day after his Iowa defeat, with different friends and aides offering advice on how to rebound, and Bush struggling to please them all.

Finally, two senior aides, Fuller and strategist Robert Teeter, all but cut off access to the "friends" and Bush focused on the job at hand. His performance in the final three days of the New Hampshire primary campaign was his best ever.

A graphic example of the way personal contacts motivate Bush came early last year when an "urgent letter" arrived for Bush one afternoon from Canandian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who was then at a low point in public esteem, in part because of what was seen as Reagan administration foot-dragging on acid rain pollution and trade policy.

Mulroney appealed to Bush for help. By day's end, Bush was on the phone with Mulroney. The next day Bush went to the Oval Office and asked Reagan for permission to make a special trip to Canada to help the conservative Mulroney.

Placating Prime Minister

At the time, the White House was considering a retreat from Reagan's commitment to spend $2.5 billion on acid rain research in a joint program with Canada. According to aides, Bush had his staff pull together Reagan's original statements endorsing the report of special U.S. and Canadian envoys on the issue. Bush complained that Energy Secretary John S. Herrington and Attorney General Edwin Meese III were stalling. He made a four-hour trip to Ottawa with then-Treasury Secretary Baker at his side. He praised Mulroney and told a news conference he had "got an earful" of complaints on acid rain and trade issues from the prime minister. Reagan subsequently stuck by the plan for $2.5 billion in acid rain research.

Such a response to a personal appeal is common for Bush, according to many of his associates. Earlier this year, for example, Bush invited Rep. Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.), to the vice president's office for breakfast after Kemp had abandoned his race for the GOP presidential nomination. Kemp forcefully presented his belief that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was making technological strides. Bush had been skeptical about the feasibility of Reagan's proposed missile defense system and had openly opposed the idea of early deployment, which Kemp had championed in the primaries.

After Kemp departed, Bush sought briefings on the subject to see what Kemp was talking about. Last week Bush shifted his position on SDI, promising as president to develop a viable strategic defense, saying that the technology was no longer a problem.

Another Bush trait cited by his associates is his instinctive faith in lines of authority. Rep. Jim Leach (R-Iowa), a longtime Bush supporter, observed that when Bush became vice president, he adapted to the "loyalty structure" that existed around the office, which meant a definition of the job that would not

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upstage the president. Bush rarely spoke out with others around him, Leach noted, and confined his advice to the president to their weekly private luncheons.

Bush adapted to Reagan's style and his positions. According to intimates, Bush thrived on the pomp surrounding his office and on the immense public approval that Reagan and he enjoyed in the first term. He told a campaign audience this year that he also enjoyed the extensive foreign travel that came with the job. All went extremely well for Bush until the '84 campaign, when he suddenly became an object of ridicule from some quarters. Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" strip depicted a mythical Bush who had put his manhood in a blind trust.

But ridicule did not alter Bush's course. Acting out of his most basic instincts, he advertised his loyalty again and again. "I'm for Mr. Reagan—blindly," Bush once said.

Bush's deference also was noted inside the councils of government. A Cabinet member said Bush did not see it within his purview to contradict others around the table at meetings with Reagan. "It may be a consequence of his respect for authority. He bent over backwards to never get in trouble with the secretary of state," he said. "He would have had any number of opportunities to do so."

If Bush did seek to press his own views, he went directly to Reagan. Little is known of these conversations even now, though some Bush initiatives have become public, mostly instances where he tried to modify what he considered excessive proposals from others. For example, he quietly blocked Attorney General Meese from rolling back a longstanding executive order on affirmative action. According to one informed source, Bush also tried in vain to quash the idea of eliminating all nuclear ballistic missiles, an idea that gained currency in the White House in mid-1986. The idea stuck in Reagan's head and later surfaced in the Reykjavik summit, to the surprise and consternation of the allies and many members of Congress.

The ultimate authority figure is the president. Sources who have been close to both men said Bush has clearly looked to Reagan as a father figure.

For example, the Iran-contra affair became public in late November 1986, creating a crisis for the Reagan administration and a political crisis for Reagan and Bush. The vice president spent several weeks searching for a verbal formula that would imply an acknowledgment of error without attributing the error to anyone in particular. He hit upon the formulation "mistakes were made," but before using those words in a speech he characteristically took them to his weekly lunch with Reagan, seeking approval.

Criticism Akin to Betrayal

"I don't know what happened there, but he got the idea somehow that Reagan wouldn't mind if he said it," recalled a Bush political adviser.

Just as he practices total loyalty, so Bush expects it from his subordinates. He has grown as angry as his advisers have ever seen him over newspaper stories quoting anonymous Bush aides criticizing their boss. Bush considers such criticism betrayal, and on more than one occasion has demanded that the source be discovered and fired. This is why "leaks" have become a preoccupation among Bush aides and campaign workers.

By the same token, Bush also extends his loyalty to subordinates. When questions were raised about the role played by his national security adviser, Donald P. Gregg, in the Iran-contra affair, Bush refused to heed the advice of others that Gregg be fired or moved to another post.

When the president seemed hesitant in rewarding Bush for his loyalty earlier this year, some Bush associates and friends said he had misplaced his trust. Former congressman Thomas W.L. (Lud) Ashley (D-Ohio), a close friend of Bush, says the vice president "didn't learn as much from the Nixon experience as he should have. Loyalty can become counterproductive." But he added of Bush, "Emotionally, he feels you can't be too loyal."

A related concern, which some have voiced privately in the Bush organization, is whether Bush would be willing to face up to the errors of his subordinates if he were in the Oval Office.

An example of this inclination that disturbed some of Bush's associates occurred shortly after the C123 cargo plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus was shot down over Nicaragua in October 1986 just before the Iran-contra scandal broke. The San Francisco Examiner reported that a Cuban-American agent, Felix Rodriguez, who was involved in the secret airlift operation that carried weapons to the Nicaraguan contras, had been placed in Central America by the office of the vice president, specifically by Gregg. The next day, the Los Angeles Times said that the agent had told associates that he reported to Bush on his activities.

Bush initially denied the reports. "There is no one on the vice president's staff who is directing or coordinating an operation in Central America," he said. "Allegations to that effect are simply not true."

Bush's denial was misleading, in part because it ignored correct information that these reports contained. The evidence developed months later by the House and Senate Iran-contra investigating committees showed that Rodriguez originally had been sent to El Salvador to help the Salvadoran government fight insurgents with the active encouragement of Bush's office. Rodriguez soon became actively involved in the secret effort to resupply the Nicaraguan contras, which used the Salvadoran air base where Rodriguez worked as its center of operations.

Two months before Bush's denial Oct. 11, Rodriguez had told Gregg of his involvement in the secret resupply effort. Gregg says he never told Bush about it, although a memo for Bush written in May noted that Rodriguez had come to brief Bush on the contra resupply effort.

Some who have worked closely with Bush say that from his experience as director of central intelligence, he instinctively defends those involved with intelligence and covert action, and thus failed to see the pitfalls of dealing with Iran. Despite Bush's service as chairman of an administration antiterrorism panel, his only known objection was over the role of Israel in the early Iran arms sales transactions. By all accounts Bush never foresaw that the secret dealings with Iran could lead to a political debacle.

Bush strikes many of his associates as a politician who is most effective when he picks one target and heads for it instead of juggling many goals simultaneously. This was the key, aides said, to the extensive preparations of Bush for the seven Republican primary debates. There were rehearsals, videotapes, and long talks about strategy. Each time, Bush planned one aggressive thrust that would make one memorable point, and then stuck with it.

Brady described the vice president as "single-minded," noting that for the primaries Bush devoted his time to almost nothing else, opting out of much White House business. "He has blocked out of his mind for six months everything but this campaign," Brady said.

He commented that Bush's method is 10 percent brains and 90 percent hard work, and that, if elected, Bush would be "an enormously hard worker and single-minded."

But others said Bush's motivation often seems uneven. A longtime associate said that Bush had to be pushed hard to give up his White House schedule and go out to campaign full-time. In this view, Bush works hard when under extreme pressure, as he was, for example, after losing the Iowa precinct caucuses last February. But if the campaign is any guide, Bush often feels free to coast when the pressure is off.

In Baker's Treasury Department anteroom hung a photo of Bush after an embarrassing sprawl at a bowling alley. "To Jim Baker," reads the inscription, "Watch and Learn: 90 percent of life is just showing up. George Bush." In earlier years Bush often embraced this maxim, attributed to Yogi Berra.

Issues and ideology have never played a motivating role in Bush's political career. "I am a practical man," he said in launching his campaign last year. "I like what's real. I'm not much for the airy and abstract; I like what works. I am not a mystic, and I do not yearn to lead a crusade."

Those who have worked with Bush say this was a candid statement of his philosophy, but they worry about those occasions, particularly in domestic policy, when Bush seems to lose interest. His advisers have been particularly frustrated in trying to brief him on economic policy.

Conciliation for Conflict

By contrast, Bush pays close attention to subjects he cares about, such as intelligence briefings, or political topics that arouse his strongly competitive instincts. Rep. Leach recalled hours of briefings for Bush on agriculture issues before the Iowa caucuses. With a team of advisers, Bush tried to frame answers to the questions he would get from farmers. "There was far more preparation for Iowa than anyone knew," Leach recalled. After all this work Bush did master answers to commonly asked agricultural questions that he used repeatedly in Iowa.

Bush looks to conciliation to resolve conflict. Faced with a difficult subject such as the federal deficit, or arms control verification, Bush often says he would let the experts "work it out."

"We're not out there at this juncture in the campaign with a 20-point program on the homeless or a 14-point program on long-term health care," Bush told an Ohio reporter in May. "But you know what I would do? Bring in new people. I'd appoint the best people I could find in areas where they know more about it than I do . . . ."

But even the best people can disagree. When he cannot find compromise, Bush sometimes appears to stall or to equivocate.

For example, Bush was trapped earlier this year between Reagan's decision to veto the Grove City civil rights bill and his own conviction that it should be signed. Most of his top advisers urged him to go public with his own beliefs, but he told them he just could not be disloyal to Reagan.

Bush's Sense of Decorum

So Bush tried to have it both ways in a speech to a black Republican audience. He said the legislation was "imperfect" and "should be corrected." But he also stated the

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principle that the government should "require" that organizations getting federal money should "comply with our civil rights laws." It was a carefully hedged line that won him applause, but did not really explain what policy he favored.

Another aspect of how Bush's political personality is his extraordinary sense of decorum. His Victorian upbringing helped create a reserved, polite, deferential personality, even under stress. For example, after his nationally televised argument over the Iran-contra affair with CBS' Dan Rather last spring, Bush's political troops were cheering. But privately he was a little remorseful because he had violated his own sense of good behavior.

"Even when he throws a punch, he's kind of sorry he did it," an aide commented.

Similarly, after his hour-long interview in June with ABC's Ted Koppel when Bush accidentally called Koppel "Dan" several times, he was mortified, and apologized repeatedly and publicly the next day.

In both those television interviews Bush was asked substantive questions about selling arms to Iran, about his own role in key administration policy decisions, about his knowledge of drug-running by Panamanian military strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega, about the allegations of wrongdoing by Attorney General Meese. But, characteristically, Bush reacted to the two anchors as individuals; what was important to him, it seemed, was how he had dealt with the people involved, not the issues.

So it has been throughout his life. Once during the Illinois primary campaign, Alixe Glen, a press assistant who has worked for Bush through three campaigns, suffered an eye injury and was forced to sit in a darkened hotel room for several days while Bush went out and campaigned.

One evening, as the television blared and the campaign passed her by, the door opened and a visitor arrived and quietly carried her dirty room service trays out into the corridor. Then George Bush sat down next to her and held her hand and said a few encouraging words.

Staff writer Bob Woodward and staff researchers Michelle Hall and William F. Powers contributed to this report.